

Much ado in Santa Monica

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [July 24, 2013](#) issue



In a summer movie lineup full of apocalyptic thrillers and flashy re-makes, Shakespeare wins the day. Joss Whedon's film adaptation of *Much Ado About Nothing* is an enchanting modern take on the 16th-century romance and a nearly perfect movie.

Whedon transposes Shakespeare's Italy to present-day Southern California, and while preserving the original language he suffuses the modern setting with an intoxicating casual glamour. Filmed in black and white in fewer than 12 days on the grounds of Whedon's Santa Monica home and using actors that have peopled his projects from his earliest days in the business, he creates an atmosphere of wit, grace and ease enlivened with a lot of wine and beautiful flowers.

The plot unfolds like a good conversation among friends. Some of the less translatable aspects of Shakespeare's plot, like the political intrigue of Italian city-states, are simply glossed over. The resulting two-hour film allows the heart of the play—the interwoven and overlapping romances between Claudio (Fran Kranz) and Hero (Jillian Morgese) and Benedick (Alexis Denisof) and Beatrice (Amy Acker)—to take center stage.

Claudio and Hero's sweet infatuation blossoms to an engagement in the film's first 15 minutes, and although they face a rocky road to the altar, their romance is all but guaranteed from the moment they lock eyes. Beatrice and Benedick, on the other hand, dance around each other in a war of wit containing the best that the English language has to offer. Denisof and Acker, aided by Shakespeare's words and Whedon's eye, bring to mind Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy in *Adam's Rib*. Poignancy and vulnerability hide just beneath the surface of their fast-flying barbs.

The course of true love, of course, does not run straight for either couple. Claudio and his boss Don Pedro (Reed Diamond) are tricked into thinking they witness Hero take another man to bed the night before her wedding. This translates well enough. Infidelity, especially so blatant, is still grounds for outrage. But the notion that Claudio's public repudiation of Hero would kill her prospects of marriage forever and nearly kill her literally does not translate so well. Reputations in our virtual age are malleable and far too superficial to warrant such drastic effects; we are as likely to elect to public office one year those we've morally repudiated the year before.

Beatrice's passionate defense of her slighted cousin and anger at the misled Claudio ("O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the marketplace!") grows out of her conviction that reputation is a matter of character. It is forged in a delicate balance of action, intention and relationships, not just gossip or celebrity in an age of iPhones (of which there are several in this *Much Ado*).

Beatrice's ability to convince Benedick of her view to the point that he challenges Claudio to a duel shifts the moral center of the film to her. This should come as no surprise to devoted Whedonites (of whom I am one).

Whedon, after all, gave us Buffy, Willow, Faith, Caroline and River. He has practically invented the new category of female hero in popular culture. And Beatrice is in many ways a perfect Whedon woman: sharp-witted, quick on her feet and given to intense passions. Beatrice does not have the superpowers or the social options of Whedon's other leading ladies, but she does have their moral center. As she calls for revenge on her wronged cousin, she calls all those around her, starting with Benedick, to higher standards of friendship, love, loyalty and honesty.

This aspect contrasts sharply with Sofia Coppola's *The Bling Ring*, which is also about the intimate desires and attachments of young women. Based on a true story, *Bling* is about a group of young women who move on the peripheries of the

Hollywood elite and break into vacationing stars' homes to raid their closets and jewelry cabinets. They think of these objects like images on a Pinterest board—if they like it, why not capture it for themselves? When they are finally arrested, they have no sense of consequences, moral or legal. Nicki (Emma Watson), frightening in her oblivion, refers to this episode as a “learning exercise” that will undoubtedly prepare her to better lead an international nonprofit “or even a country, for all I know.”

If Nicki's breezy conflation of tabloid exposure with moral instruction passes for virtue ethics in our reality-TV age, *Much Ado's* social conventions seem like a necessary corrective. That this corrective goes down as easily as a martini at a summer garden party does not diminish its power.

As with many of Whedon's most successful projects, the power of his moral vision lies in the pleasure of the company he keeps and invites us to share. It is, after all, in the company of friends, as Beatrice reminds us, that our character is most made and tested.